

Report on Winter 2013 Meeting for Discernment

On March 2, 2013 New York Yearly Meeting's Meeting for Discernment convened for the eleventh time. We met in Brooklyn Monthly Meeting's historic meeting room for the morning session and in their social hall for the afternoon and follow-up sessions. About 70 friends attended. About 20 elders served the meeting; some met the night before to share a meal and prepare to hold the next day's meeting in prayer.

The Friday evening elders session was clerked by Anne Pomeroy and Lu Harper. Saturday morning's session was clerked by Lucinda Antrim, the afternoon session by Ed Elder, and the follow-up meeting for reflection and discussion late Saturday afternoon was clerked by Roger Dreisbach-Williams. We were also served by three note takers: John Edminster, Steve Ross, and Andy von Salis.

Morning queries focused on the monthly meetings: "What are your dreams, yearnings, and hopes for your meeting? What is God calling your meeting to become?" Afternoon queries focused on the Yearly Meeting: "What are your hopes, leadings, and expectations for our yearly meeting as a gathered body? What work is God calling us to do together that we cannot do separately?"

What follows is a compendium of what was said. Some themes which arose in the morning session continued into the afternoon; the report groups themes together, so that at times something mentioned as a response to afternoon queries is recorded under the morning queries and vice versa. Many quotes are used; our hope is that they capture the spirit, if not at all times the exact words, of what was said.

What we heard

"What are your dreams, yearnings, and hopes for your meeting? What is God calling your meeting to become?"

We are busy:

We wrestle with how to serve the community around us when many serve on committees at the monthly, quarterly, and yearly meeting levels.

An enormous amount of our energy is spent maintaining ourselves; a much smaller amount goes to outreach to the world.

There is a lot of work to do and a small number doing the work.

We've laid down some work for lack of people to do it.

Committee work is demanding, but important.

We are tired.

My dream is that we have enough energy to nurture ourselves.

We're in danger of becoming "human doings."

We are busy with:

Inreach:

Our M&C committee nurtures us through a table at rise of meeting where people can speak about their spiritual quest, and has started discussions of Quaker history and practice.

We're reaching out to elderly people.

Quaker companions constantly in my hospital room got me through my heart transplant.

We meet the needs of our children by having semi-programmed meetings for children and unprogrammed meetings for adults, and we get together afterward for joys and sorrows.

We have Friday night movies to bring in both younger and older Friends.

Friends United Meeting's '40 days of Prayer' helped us connect. Quaker Quest, Rex Ambler's Experiment with Light, and Occupy Wall Street have enlivened us.

We are telling each other about our spiritual journeys, and listening more tenderly to one another. What brought you to Friends? What keeps you coming?

Outreach:

We created a meeting brochure. Internet methods of outreach are being tried.

To revitalize the meeting is a slow, incremental process.

We are about to begin Quaker Quest.

Witness:

We have a lot of energy and enthusiasm for causes.

We are spending a year at a time studying FCNL, AFSC, etc.

We send checks to Quaker organizations and to a local food pantry.

We support a peace vigil at Washington Square Park.

We are involved in AVP in prisons.

Our community's annual MLK Day celebration is held in our meeting house.

We have a shelter 365 nights a year.

We work on peace issues, on gun control, on many, many committees.

Challenges come with our activities:

We are spread out, so it's hard to know each other.

It is hard to do Bible study, deep worship sharing, and other ways of nourishing rootedness in a sustainable way. We look for inspiration as to how. We want to increase connectivity and rootedness, not just within our meeting but with other meetings.

Occupy Wall Street was the most hopeful sign we've seen in a long time. Our support

felt courageous. Still, there were risks in our support, in our storage of items for the occupiers which we worried might include contraband, and not all were comfortable with the risks. The question of risks involved with our causes is still unsettling for my meeting.

Hurricane Sandy knocked us off track. In our tiredness we've used our time more wisely. There are some still without homes. After rebuilding the physical structures of our lives we can get on to greater spiritual matters.

The use of the spaces we own and share can be challenging:

We've spent much labor on trying to have the right relationship with Friends Seminary.

We have many witness activities, but little physical room.

We have too much space, a shrinking membership, and are selling our 1927 Meeting house.

We share space with 14 groups, including a school whose administrator is not a Quaker.

We wrestle with what sometimes feels an uncomfortable tension between doing and being:

Those who want to start from love within and those who want to do action seem to be coming from very different places.

Witness is part of who we are, not separate from the life of the meeting.

Our causes are not what we're about. They are just the manifestations.

We are challenged to grow in the spirit:

The divine has the power to transform a life.

Much is motivated by anger, by things we want to see stopped, but the divinely-inspired solution should not resemble the problem.

Sometimes we say too much, creating a flood, instead of focusing on saying only what is true, kind, and necessary, which fulfills.

Many experience fear to speak our truth to the world lest we become proselytizers. We need to have ministry of the presence experienced beyond the meetinghouse door.

Whenever we are faced with fear and anger we should turn affirmatively to love—there is more than enough love. I hope for my meeting that whenever we gather in worship we are recreated. Each of us has access to divine love.

We have a great gift and a legacy and there's tremendous reticence to share the truth we've been given. We have been called to be a priesthood of believers!, yet we shrink in fear. Each of us can express in the world an overwhelming joy and purpose in our own lives; people will see the great people to be gathered.

I need a few minutes each day to let the power of God order me.

I felt shut out of my meeting. Some of the obstacles now seem to be within me, or to have been internalized.

We wonder why we don't have more vocal ministry. Do we know and trust one another well enough to share vocally?

I yearn, long, to experience a gathered meeting, for a visceral experience of gatheredness.

We have continuing revelation all our life long . . . our relationship with God begins at birth—or before, and we learn God sitting in meeting, even the youngest of us.

We can be like yeast, which though scattered, makes the bread rise up.

Our gift is to be present where we are.
Sink down into the living waters and being refreshed, rise up in joy, bringing hope:
wherever God leads us will be OK.

We are different demographically:

We have children.

We've had a stable membership, but there are virtually no children.

We are growing older.

On the spiritual side, we're healthy. On the secular side, there are concerns: we are aging, and a small portion of our membership contributes a large part of our budget.

We work on stewardship:

Although our finances are shrinking, we have for the first time seen that everyone who regularly comes gives, no matter how little.

Our meeting and the school under our care operate with the slimmest of margins.

When we focused on our finances and wrote a letter to each Friend detailing their history of giving, it helped.

Some Friends are concerned that we have too much money, both individually and as meetings, and hoard it.

We have accumulated the money over many years and the sale of our meetinghouse will further add to the amount.

We began our present journey when we realized we had insufficient money two years in a row, so we began to think about gifts. A small committee was set up to explore what gifts we had, and came up with a new letter that included each member's 5-year history of giving. We became more conscious of our giving, which helped us to raise enough money this year and to contribute an additional amount to the yearly meeting.

Our large and growing financial resources diminish our meeting's right relationships.

What are your hopes, leadings, and expectations for our yearly meeting as a gathered body? What work is God calling us to do together that we cannot do separately?"

Yearly Meeting does a lot, some of which monthly meetings cannot do, or do as well, on their own:

- ❖ Yearly Meeting has always had a concern for prison work and work against the death penalty. Monthly meetings and worship groups cannot do this work alone. There is an urgent need for facilitators for prison worship groups.
- ❖ Yearly Meeting can uphold a concern for equality in marriage.
- ❖ Yearly Meeting can enhance and deepen the spiritual life of all its members.
- ❖ Yearly Meeting can provide support and programming for families and children.
- ❖ Yearly Meeting provides Powell House—one of the best things it does. I'd like to see Yearly Meeting support it more actively.
- ❖ Yearly Meeting is a religious society, allowing us to be more faithful to our Creator and the living group.
- ❖ The experience of the healing prayer group at Yearly Meeting Sessions was profound, one of opening.
- ❖ No monthly meeting contains the fullness of all our monthly meetings together. Yet the authority is in the monthly meeting; Yearly Meeting supports.
- ❖ We are scattered, and the net that draws us more closely together is even more vital.
- ❖ Yearly Meeting has staff and leadership that move around the Yearly Meeting, and Meetings for Discernment represent another way of our being a living body.
- ❖ Yearly Meeting has begun to develop a form of eldership for 21st century Friends.
- ❖ In Meetings for Discernment, good queries help us be more faithful.
- ❖ There are many ways to name, talk about, God. We have learned to listen to different theological expressions without being put off.

Our hopes for the Yearly Meeting:

We have a desire for a common understanding of the goal of yearly meeting.

For both my monthly and yearly meeting, I yearn for a commitment, in the words of Jesus, "to destroy the works of the devil and free men and women from bondage." (Luke 13:36)

A Yearly Meeting which reflects the demographics of the nation; more people of color.

I'd like to see us "appoint our overseers, anoint our elders, and record our ministers" as Friends used to put it. Our organizational structure is why we survived when other sects died out.

Pastored meetings of NYYM are not as well represented or understood.

“Be not afraid.” Jesus said, and it remains timely for us today. It may take a few generations, but stand tall and show the world.

It is not easy:

We are often afraid. Especially of what we are doing to our planet.

Our closeness may not sustain us in a secular sense going forward.

Our job is not to not to fall down, but to rise up again, shining. We need community to do that.

We are supported by one another:

I have friends throughout NYYM and NEYM whose presence I can feel even though we have no outward contact.

I feel the presence of those who are incarcerated.

Yet sometimes we need each other’s physical presence.

Our group’s energy comes from both our intentionality and God’s grace.

We are called to be midwives: in prisons, for the environment, the thousand items we face every day, bringing God’s love into manifestation. It is not easy. There are no rules, except to stand in the light and be shown the way.

There is more than enough love.

Although past reports have not always included reports on the final session of the day, our note takers recorded what they heard; it is meaningful and we have included it here.

Experiences of Eldering

I had a message, and it did not feel like I was departing from eldering in giving it.

I found I was held by the body as much as holding it.

Eldering is going into my prayer mode, getting to that place where I can hold my arms around everybody.

I pour out my soul, give thanks, and pray for everyone.

I’d submerge, emerge, submerge, emerge.

It was very physical for me—tension, release—and now I feel wrung out, exhausted . . . but, I *trust* you, and that’s remarkable.

I didn’t intend to elder, but last night when I saw you all in worship, I just had to join—the words of the song “he’s not heavy, he’s my brother” come to me—it was not heavy all day.

I carry the body, and continue to carry it—just like when I let a person into my heart, that person stays there.

There is no handbook on eldering; it’s something you learn by experience. I was just loving each person, and it wasn’t my love.

There is a sense of responsibility to the community that comes together in Meeting for Discernment.

I was very aware of the increased level of discipline and trust. Many times I felt I was in a gathered meeting. It feels as though the spirit is doing the holding and it has less to do with me. Usually in the past I've felt myself called to hold and encircle the body, but not today. It *was* a body.

This report was compiled by the clerk of the Meetings for Discernment Steering Committee, Lucinda Antrim, and reviewed and revised by members of the Steering Committee.